United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/44

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
2 December 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by the International Public Policy Institute, Pathways to Peace, the Women's Intercultural Network and the Women's World Summit Foundation, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61884 (E) 271211

Please recycle

Statement

Convening a fifth United Nations/non-governmental organizations world conference on women and girls

We urge the Commission on the Status of Women, at its fifty-sixth session, to support and facilitate the holding of a fifth United Nations/non-governmental organizations world conference on women and girls by sending the present statement to the Secretary-General, the General Assembly and all United Nations entities concerned about the situation of women and girls. The target date for the conference is 2015, 20 years after the holding of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Rather than being an end in itself, such a conference would be a major step towards ensuring that human and women's rights are considered as one and the same, and that peace and sustainability become possible through the establishment of equality between men and women in decision-making.

The fifth world conference on women and girls would make widespread use of the Internet and technology, which make it possible for people everywhere to be aware of issues and solutions: what delegates will say, hear, see and learn could be shared worldwide through live-streaming technologies and social networking tools, and by 2015, yet more technology will be available for this purpose. We envision that technology will link the fifth world conference with local women's conferences held throughout the world. The themes that would be addressed at the fifth world conference could be coordinated with and applied to local, regional or national concerns. Individuals at the conference would be able to communicate directly with their home circles, communities and local conferences. Events and presentations would educate, appeal to and inspire others to find out what is happening to women and girls worldwide, as well as learn what women and girls are accomplishing. Knowledge empowers, role models inspire and ideas lead to other ideas. As we saw with the United States civil rights and women's movements and in the demonstrations for democracy that took place in Arab countries in the spring of 2011, when a critical number of people change perceptions and expectations, ideas that had been resisted or suppressed become widely accepted and this, in turn, changes institutions and culture.

A fifth world conference on women and girls would develop the next generation of global and local women leaders with an international vision. The United Nations world conferences on women were critical to the development of the women who attended them. Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, spoke before the Commission on the Status of Women about this in 2009. These conferences help shape and support women's vision and spirit, and allow them to exchange practical and political help through the friendships and alliances they make. In the context of the 15-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (at the fifty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women), there was further evidence of how important it is to attend such conferences, as well as an awareness that most of the women who attended the above-mentioned conferences are now over 50 years of age. In order to have a next generation of global and local women leaders with an international outlook and global connections with one another, a fifth world

conference on women and girls is needed. Such an event is especially important for creating and mobilizing an intergenerational, effective leadership. Younger women leaders could be mentored and inspired by the people they would meet and by what they would learn at the conference. Women collaborate with empathy and, by sharing stories, they can support each other and work towards similar goals. E-mail, Facebook and Skype will help strengthen bonds between individuals and organizations attending the conference.

The influence of a fifth world conference on humanity and the planet would be all the greater if the broadest cross-section of women attended. The intention is to include women who represent different cultures, are of different skin colours and come from different geographical regions, economic backgrounds, including rural and impoverished areas. Consciousness-raising among women about their common concerns and different challenges leads women to learn from and support each other across borders and social and ethnic differences that would otherwise keep them separated. With diversity being a priority, plans for a fifth world conference must, from the beginning, be inclusive.

Furthermore, it should be financially possible for women from non-governmental organizations in rural and impoverished areas to attend; such aid could be awarded through a scholarship, which would be an honour and a source of pride for the organization.

Circles are an effective concept for women to mobilize around deeply held values. The archetypes of sisterhood and motherhood connect women at a deep level; women become conscious of this when they have the opportunity to meet in circles. To support this outcome and to increase collaboration and support among women, we encourage the use of circles during the preliminary process and at the fifth world conference. Circles are the oldest, most widespread and most effective tool for creating personal and social change (T. A. Thompson, "Circles of change", *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Fall 2011). Networking that begins in a circle has a foundation of trust based upon vision and support.

For peace and sustainability, political decisions should be made and budgets decided upon without interminable conflicts, economic risk-taking or threats of aggression. Women's involvement in such activities is vital. We know that women respond to stress differently than men. Women reduce stress by sharing perceptions, feelings and strategies. This is called the "tend and befriend" response. This response, which is hormonally driven, supports dialogue, collaboration and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Research supports the designation of women as the "empathic gender" (Simon Baron-Cohen research summation, 2003), in contrast to the male "fight or flight" response to stress. In general, the female brain is geared towards assessing the feelings and intentions of others, engaging in communication and defusing conflict. By contrast, in men, whenever stress is experienced as a threat to status or territory, fear, anger and aggression come to the fore.

A fifth world conference for women and girls would support the implementation of United Nations documentation on women's empowerment and equality, including Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, General Assembly resolutions on the girl child, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the recommendations for gender equality and equal participation of women in decisions on the environment. A fifth world conference would raise consciousness about the

importance of these documents and the need for their implementation. The conference requires the backing of a critical number of empowered women and women in high positions. Mobilization of women on their own behalf has been the most effective and often the only reason for the gains made so far.

A fifth world conference would support a women's agenda and help create the political will to create a world where children, and therefore everyone, would not fear physical or psychological violence, where there is enough good food to eat, clean air and water, health care, education and the freedom to think, speak, create and love. A fifth world conference would energize the global women's movement towards this end.

The holding of a fifth world conference has grass-roots support. Advocacy efforts for such a conference began in 2002, with the presentation of the "millionth circle initiative" (see J. S. Bolen, *The Millionth Circle*, 1999) at conferences and, beginning in 2005, at the sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women. Panels and workshops have been held at parallel events each year since 2007. A petition that was posted online in 2009 now has 13,600 signatures (see www.gopetition.com/petitions/5WCW/html). A conference website (www.5wcw.org) has been established as an online information centre. Member States to initiate and support the preparation of a General Assembly resolution calling for the holding of a fifth United Nations/non-governmental organizations world conference on women and girls.